

ON SERGII BULGAKOV'S THE TRAGEDY OF PHILOSOPHY*

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I

What do Immanuel Kant and Pablo Picasso have in common? What sounds like the beginning of a bad academic joke was a serious question for the Russian philosopher-theologian Sergii Bulgakov (1871-1944). For the affinities between the twentieth-century artist and the eighteenth-century philosopher were, for him, substantial. Indeed, readers of Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy*—recently published in translation by Angelico Press—might consider the description of Kant as a 'cubist' and of his philosophy as a 'cubism', one of the book's more outlandish and perplexing claims. Nor is it a claim that Bulgakov makes only once. In *Tragedy*, Kant's epistemology is described as 'subjective-cubistic',¹ in response to Kant's conviction that the unity of perceptions does not arise from objects themselves, but is instead imparted by the understanding to experience.² Later in the same work, Bulgakov simply inserts the exclamation 'cubism!' into a citation from Kant's own text on the unifying role of the understanding. These are the only two instances in *Tragedy* where Kant's alleged cubism is asserted. They are marginal and gnomic assertions, and give an indication of the perplexities that await the intrepid reader. But they nonetheless gesture toward the abiding concern of this work. For Kant's 'cubism' has to do with his approach to *unity*, and particularly his view of the understanding as imparting unity to experience, rather than the unity of things being received by the understanding from the perceived objects themselves.

Bulgakov has more to say on Kant's 'cubism' elsewhere. The characterisation of Kant as a cubist pre-dates the extended discussion of the latter's philosophy in *Tragedy* by a few years, first appearing in a 1914 article on the works of Pablo Picasso, published under the title 'The Corpse of Beauty'.³ Here Bulgakov claims that the parallel between Kant and Picasso has been

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¹ Sergii Bulgakov, *Tragedy of Philosophy*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (New York: Angelico Press, 2020), 32, note 10.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 134.

³ 'Trup krasoty' [The Corpse of Beauty], in Sergii Bulgakov, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2, ed. I. B. Rodnianskaia (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 527-45.

noted elsewhere, and he is likely referring to another 1914 article on Picasso, this time by Nikolai Berdiaev.⁴ As for Bulgakov, what is at stake for Berdiaev in defining a ‘cubist’ philosophy is its approach to unity, and particularly the unity that both Bulgakov and Berdiaev claim for the world independently of reason. Berdiaev understands a cubist philosophy as one which sunders the unity of the world: ‘cubism is possible in philosophy also. Thus the critical genealogy ends in its latter stages with the slicing up and scattering of being’.⁵ Bulgakov will describe cubism in similar—albeit more graphic—terms, as a decomposition of organic, living unity. ‘Putrefaction, the smell of rotting flesh and of the disintegrating physical plane are perfectly palpable’ when viewing Picasso’s portraits, whilst in cubism as a whole ‘everything, even living things become matter, become composite, die and disintegrate’.⁶ The artist and the philosopher stand together in their sundering of the concrete, living unity of things and in their imposition upon nature of the lifeless, abstract unities of the mind: ‘[there is] a growing indifference to the content of a painting and a gradual transformation of the art of colour into an art of geometry’.⁷

But there is one more ‘conceptual character’ who is yet to make their appearance: the saint. If in the case of Picasso, the artist is in league with the Kantian philosopher, then by disposition the artist possesses an innate affinity with the saint: ‘the artist finds themselves in a particularly intimate communion with the soul of the world [. . .] the artist especially is privy to that limpidity of the flesh which is the attainment of the saints’.⁸ What Bulgakov seems to mean here is that artist and saint are alike characterised by a certain way of seeing. Both perceive the coherence, or again, the unity of things. For the ‘limpidity of the flesh’ means the transparency of matter to form or idea: the saint and the artist behold the idea that is realised in matter, discern the coherence of matter in its expressing this or that particular form. This is what it is to perceive *beauty*, ‘which is nothing else but actualized form’.⁹ So to perceive the unity of *this* world is to perceive its unity with the world of ideas, or what Bulgakov calls ‘the Divine Wisdom’. The violence of Picasso lies in a treatment of his subjects, especially living human bodies, as merely physical. Thus considered, they lose their coherence, their life, whence the ‘smell of rotting flesh’.

If the relation between the saint and the artist is ambiguous, then the saint and the philosopher tend to be quite straightforwardly opposed. They instantiate two very different modes of knowing, or two very different approaches to unity: ‘the experience of the saints qualitatively differs from the wisdom of this world, for in it creation is known not from without, but from *within*, not in the *mauvais infini* of Kantian experience, but with the inner eye in *wholeness and unity*’.¹⁰ So the philosopher seeks to stand *apart from* the world and to know it or impose unity on it from without. The philosopher, Bulgakov writes in *Tragedy*, ‘has wished to create a (logical) world out of himself, out of his own principle—“you shall be as gods”’.¹¹ The saint, however, knows the world from within and thus is privy to a vision of its proper unity. In this way, the saint is presented in *Tragedy* as capable of a knowledge that surpasses the possibilities of philosophy: ‘why not postulate [. . .] an ascent into super-rational realms, realms which, although they are not

⁴ Rodnianskaia is the source of this connection. Cf. her notes in *Sochineniia*, vol. 2, 719.

⁵ Nikolai Berdiaev, ‘Pikasso’, first published in *Sofia* 3 (1914). Available at <http://www.picasso-pablo.ru/library/berdyaev-picasso.html> (in Russian). (Accessed 28 September 2020).

⁶ Bulgakov, ‘Corpse’, 541.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 542.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 538.

⁹ Sergii Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 202.

¹⁰ Sergii Bulgakov, ‘Hypostasis and Hypostaseity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*’, trans. Anastassy Brandon Gallaher and Irina Kukota, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1-2 (2005): 5-46 (38). Translation modified.

¹¹ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 5.

yet accessible to reason, are attainable in principle and are by no means inaccessible, according to the testimony of the Christian ascetics?¹²

This picture of the ascetic and the philosopher is remarkable in two respects. The first concerns the assertion that the saint, unlike the philosopher, is *within* the world. Is this not a contradiction in terms? For surely the ascetic, in their flight from the city to the desert, is driven above all by a desire to renounce the world? Indeed, is not the detached perspective sought by the philosopher a particular iteration of the ascetic impulse to separate oneself from the world? 'What, then, is the meaning of the ascetic ideal in the case of a philosopher? My answer is—you will have guessed it long ago: the philosopher sees in it an optimum condition for the highest and boldest spirituality and smiles'.¹³ The trio of artist, philosopher and ascetic had, in fact, been put together before Bulgakov by Nietzsche, who likewise considered each as instantiating a particular relation to the world. If ascetic ideals mean nothing for artists, since 'they do not stand nearly independently enough in the world and *against* the world',¹⁴ then the philosopher identifies themselves with the saint: 'they are not unbiased witnesses and judges of the *value* of the ascetic ideal, these philosophers! They think of *themselves*—what is "the saint" to them!'¹⁵

Bulgakov, *pace* Nietzsche, uncouples the philosopher and the ascetic, in order to align the latter with the artist as enjoying a 'particularly intimate communion with the soul of the world'. And this through the *affirmation* of the body that a properly Christian *ascesis* entails. 'A metaphysical affirmation of the flesh in its ontological essence, fullness and sanctity' underwrites Christian *ascesis*, which recognises 'not only the fullness of the flesh but also its individuality, that is, the feeling of the *body, my body*, which is in some sense an inalienable and indestructible aspect of my *I*'.¹⁶ So the 'intimate communion' of the saint and the artist with the world, a communion that permits a vision of the unity of the world with itself and with the divine, is a function of the body and depends upon an affirmation of particular embodied existence. Thus, Bulgakov arrives at the bewildering conclusion that Picasso's work, which repeats the Kantian philosopher's rejection of the given, organic unity of the world, expresses a hostility to and denial of the full reality of the body: 'in the work of Picasso one distinctly feels the presence of that noumenal sin against the flesh'.¹⁷ (Anyone familiar with the photographs of Picasso playing, dancing, eating and painting in nothing but shorts in his studio in California will be aware of the injustice of this judgement).¹⁸ But again, what Bulgakov means by this is that Picasso does not recognise that the coherence and unity of the body is a function of its being a spiritual as well as physical reality. On such an account, the denial of the former leads to the disintegration of the latter.

The crucial and seemingly paradoxical point is that apprehending the unity of the world, which according to Bulgakov is the proper problem of philosophy,¹⁹ is incommensurable with the pursuit of a totalising gaze, or 'view from nowhere'. Rather, and this is the second remarkable feature of Bulgakov's presentation of the saint, knowledge of the whole depends upon inhabiting a particular location within it. The ideal of impersonal, universal knowledge is a contradiction in terms; for knowledge to be knowledge of the whole, it must of necessity also be *my* knowledge. Bulgakov expresses this in *Tragedy* by saying that we are mistaken when we think that our knowledge is

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Third Essay: 'What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?', §7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, §5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §8.

¹⁶ Bulgakov, 'Corpse', 539.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. David Douglas Duncan, *The Private World of Pablo Picasso* (New York: Ridge Press, 1958).

¹⁹ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 3f.

primarily concerned with states of affairs that exist ‘out there’ independently of ourselves, that knowledge is fundamentally made up of judgements of the form ‘A is B’. Rather, judgements of the form ‘A is B’ always conceal a more fundamental judgement of the form ‘I am A’. Our judgements about states of affairs are in fact as many acts of self-determination, or self-expression with respect to the world, such that we are necessarily *involved* in our judgements about the world, no matter how hard we try to suppress that involvement. Put in terms familiar to recent discussions of language, the activity of description, for Bulgakov, always presupposes the activity of expression.²⁰

We are thus led through seemingly outlandish and marginal comments about Kant’s cubism to the fundamental pre-occupation of Bulgakov’s *The Tragedy of Philosophy*. The perceived tragedy of philosophy is that reason is incapable of fulfilling its inherent aspirations: ‘the philosopher cannot but fly; he must ascend into the ether; but his wings inevitably melt in the heat of the sun, and he falls and breaks into fragments’.²¹ As we have seen, the cause of this failure lies in the attempt to know the world from without, when in fact all knowledge is necessarily situated. In response to this failure, Bulgakov seeks in *Tragedy* to provide what might be called a theory of integral knowledge,²² an epistemology that begins from the fundamentally personal form of knowledge. This requires a further act of integration: that of epistemology and morality. For as the example of the saint shows, the way in which we know is dependent on the way in which we live: the saint’s vision of the unity of the world is a product of their humility, their willingness to live within the world; the failure of the philosopher is a product of their hubris, of a fundamental act of self-assertion that Bulgakov will describe as demonic or Luciferian in nature.²³ Thus our knowing, to once again use terms prevalent in recent discussion, is inseparable from a way of life, a habitus that conditions the mode of our access to the world.

Just as Bulgakov’s inscribing of error into the procedures of reason is in keeping with Kant’s critical project,²⁴ so too is the method whereby he arrives at his ‘involved’ epistemology. For he does so by asking about the conditions assumed by reason in its operations. What assumed conditions underwrite our pursuit of unity? What conditions underwrite the failure of philosophical thought in this pursuit? Once again in keeping with Kant’s ambitions, the answers found to these questions have both epistemological *and* metaphysical import. However, while Kant will maintain that the conditions of a thing’s appearing to us in experience need not hold for the thing in itself, Bulgakov will argue that the conditions according to which experience and thought are possible hold for the objects of thought and experience. More concretely, the fact that the condition for these activities is that they be situated with respect to a personal subject, that thinking and experiencing are always *someone’s* thinking and experiencing, does not condemn us to an inescapable anthropomorphism. Rather, it means that personhood must be inherent to the way things are; that metaphysics is necessarily personal; that the unity of things is the unity of personal life. And this, for Bulgakov, means that the unity of things is necessarily Trinitarian. For the revelation of God as Trinity is also the revelation of God as personal and thus also of the personal-cum-Trinitarian nature of the world, made in the image and likeness of God. The goal

²⁰ Cf. for example, Charles Taylor’s discussion of the ‘expressive’ function of language in his *The Language Animal* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), 29–50.

²¹ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 5.

²² This is the title of a work by Vladimir Solov’ëv, whose influence on Bulgakov in general and on this work in particular will be discussed later.

²³ This argument runs throughout ‘Corpse’ with reference to Picasso. It also surfaces at several points in *Tragedy*, with reference to Fichte, to whom is ascribed a ‘Luciferian madness’ (53) and to Hegelianism, which is described as ‘possessed’ (64).

²⁴ E.g., Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 298/B 354 f.: ‘what we have to do with here is a natural and unavoidable illusion [. . .] one that irremediably attaches to human reason, so that even after we have exposed the mirage it will still not cease to lead our reason on with false hopes’.

of *Tragedy* is thus the unification of epistemology, morality and ontology, a unification that has its rationale in the Trinitarian structure of creation.

This notion that the world is personal because Trinitarian requires further elucidation. As a first step in that elucidation, it is worth noting that in its pre-occupation with unity, *Tragedy* is very much a product of its context. Bulgakov himself said that the motivation of his intellectual life was 'characteristic of many Russians: they look for a general understanding of life, a *Weltanschauung*. [...] The Russian soul longs for the integrity of life'.²⁵ An early review in English likewise pointed out that in its preoccupation with unity, *Tragedy* confirmed the view expressed by Semën Frank that 'the characteristic of Russian philosophy is that it seeks to express the religious and emotional intuition of life *as a whole*'.²⁶ This peculiarly Russian preoccupation with wholeness is concentrated in the notion of *sobornost'*, a word that runs right through *Tragedy*, together with the adjectival form *sobornii*. The latter is the Slavic translation of 'catholic', whilst *sobor* can mean variously a gathering, a council or a cathedral.²⁷ *Sobornost'* names the quality of being together, of unity-in-plurality that is instantiated in the various meanings of *sobor*. It is primarily an interpersonal unity, but also branches out to name the integrity of the created world and also the relation of God with the world. *Sobornost'*, together with 'integral knowledge' [*tsel'noe znanie*], are the central concepts in what is known as Slavophilism,²⁸ a philosophico-theological tendency that began in the early nineteenth century and sought to articulate the distinctive character of Russian or Slavic thought, culture and character with respect to the West. Against the individualizing character of Western theoretical philosophy and political thought, the Slavophiles argued for a theoretical and practical approach that foregrounded relationship and unity. In theoretical philosophy, this was expressed in the pursuit of an 'integral knowledge', which insisted on the pre-eminence of the complexity of the concrete over the abstract. In practical philosophy, this was expressed especially in the notion of *sobornost'*, which asserted that the individual is a secondary reality, derivative of a primary collective, such that individual human fulfilment can only come about through living into that organic, interpersonal unity.

Both the theoretical and practical dimensions of this emphasis on unity are developed in the work of Vladimir Solov'ëv (1853-1900), a cardinal influence on the generation of Russian religious philosophers that included Bulgakov. Key terms in Bulgakov's lexicon have their origin in Solov'ëv's philosophy of unity, such as 'Divine-Humanity' [*bogochelovechestvo*] and 'all-unity' [*vseedinstvo*]. More substantially, Solov'ëv's *Lectures on Divine Humanity* (1878) contain *in nuce* the interweaving of language, personhood and the Trinity that is central to *Tragedy*. In particular, in the sixth of his lectures, Solov'ëv interprets being as having a necessarily propositional structure: 'if grammatically the verb "to be" forms only a link between the subject and the predicate, then logically too, *being* can be conceived only *as the relation of an existent to its objective essence*'.²⁹ This propositional structure is attributed above all to God, whose naming of himself as 'I AM' to Moses invites such an attribution. Moreover, this propositional structure is a threefold one (subject-predicate-copula), with Solov'ëv interpreting the constituent elements of the proposition in terms of the three 'modes or positings' of divine being, or the three Persons of the Trinity: 'it is necessary to assume for these three eternal acts *three eternal subjects (hypostases)*. The second of these [...] expresses through its own actuality the

²⁵ Sergii Bulgakov, 'Du marxisme à la sophiologie', *Le messager orthodoxe*, 98 (1985): 88-95 (88).

²⁶ Natalie Duddington, 'Philosophy in Russia', *Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2, no. 8 (1927): 550-52 (551).

²⁷ Cf. Robert Bird, 'General Introduction', in *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader*, ed. and trans. by Boris Jakim and Robert Bird (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1998), 15.

²⁸ These terms are described as 'like two immortal poems, they express entire worlds in their compact energy and unfathomable depth. [...] The Slavophiles' thought is all about *sobornost* and integral knowledge; these concepts stand at the beginning and end of their writings'. Robert Bird, *On Spiritual Unity*, 8.

²⁹ Vladimir Solov'ëv, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, ed. and trans. by Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1995), 77. Emphasis in the original.

essential content of the first, serving as the eternal expression, or the Word, for the first'.³⁰ Finally, this propositional scheme is characteristic also of created personhood and so constitutes an *imago Trinitatis*: 'the triadic relation of our subject to its content corresponds to the relation pointed out above of the absolute subject, or that which absolutely is, to its absolute content'.³¹

The relationship between this threefold propositional structure and the assertion that the essence of God is the all-one or all-unity needs clarification. First, that the essence of God must necessarily be all-unity is determined without reference to this propositional structure; instead, it follows from the definition of God as *absolute*: 'If the divine essence were not all-one, if it did not contain the all, then something could be essentially outside God. But in that case, God [. . .] would therefore not be absolute'.³² In other words, the definition of God as 'all-unity' is a function of God as absolute. So how does the definition of God as absolute relate to the characterisation of divine being as propositional? Unity and 'absolute-ness' are made especially characteristic of the *first positing* of divine being, i.e., of the divine 'subject', the Father: 'As the absolute principle, God must include or contain all in Himself in *continuous and immediate substantial unity*. In this *first positing*, the all is contained in God, that is, in the divine subject or existent . . .'.³³ By contrast, if the Father 'expresses absolute unity', then the second positing, or the Son, 'expresses the all, or *multiplicity*'.³⁴ This is reinforced in the subsequent lecture, where Solov'ëv presents each of the divine Persons or 'modes of being' as enjoying a descending proximity to the 'inner unity' that is the divine nature: 'the three modes of being [. . .] do not represent the inner unity to the same degree. Clearly, this unity is strongest and, so to speak, most inward, most intimate, in *will* as goodness [i.e., in the Person of the Father], for in the act of will, the object of will is not yet separated from the subject [. . .]. It remains in an essential unity with it'.³⁵

The propositional, Trinitarian scheme may thus seem superfluous to the definition of God as all-unity and as absolute. 'One may ask: if God, as the first subject, already includes the absolute content, or the all, what need is there for the other two subjects?'³⁶ Solov'ëv's answer is that God's being *absolute* is after all dependent upon God's being triune: 'God as the absolute or unconditioned, cannot be content with having all in Himself; He must also have all *for Himself* and *with Himself*. Without such fullness of existence, Divinity cannot be perfect or absolute'.³⁷ Thus 'God the Father, by His very nature, cannot exist without the Word by Whom He is expressed and without the Spirit Who asserts Him'.³⁸ We thus attain some clarity as to the relation between Solov'ëv's definitions of God as the 'all-one', as absolute, and as Trinitarian. But with this clarification it also becomes apparent that the definition of God as Trinity is deduced ultimately from the definition of God as 'all'. For God to be absolute, God must be Trinity and this *because* only a threefold possession of the *all*, or the divine nature, is exhaustive. In other words, the trinity of Persons is necessitated by the demands of nature. But this is precisely the kind of understanding of the Trinity that Bulgakov will contest in his more mature Trinitarian work.³⁹ There, Bulgakov will argue that one

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

³² *Ibid.*, 78.

³³ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁹ For Bulgakov's critique of Solov'ëv's deduction of the Trinity from the necessity of nature, see Brandon Gallaher, 'Antinomism, Trinity and the Challenge of Solov'ëvan Pantheism in the Theology of Sergij Bulgakov', *Studies in East European Thought* 64, no. 3-4 (2012): 205-25, esp. 206-11.

cannot maintain that the trinity of hypostases arises as a *condition* for the exhaustive realisation of the nature. Rather, prior to any determination with respect to nature, the tri-unity of persons is inherent to personal self-consciousness: the self-consciousness of the *I* requires the presence of both a *you* and a (*s*)*he*. Thus with respect to the Trinity, 'tri-hypostaseity logically precedes the definition of individual hypostases in their concrete correlation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.⁴⁰ We find the beginnings of this separation of 'tri-unity' from the demands of nature already in *Tragedy*, although this argument is not developed as fully as in subsequent works.⁴¹

Indeed, Bulgakov's *Tragedy of Philosophy* is in many ways an extended development of this sixth lecture by Solov'ëv. Bulgakov will likewise attribute a propositional structure to reality. The judgement 'I am something' expresses 'in abbreviated form a schema for what truly exists',⁴² 'the structure of the real itself'.⁴³ "'Substance" exists not only "in itself", as a subject, but also "for itself", as a predicate, and, moreover, "in and for itself", in the copula, as existence'.⁴⁴ This propositional structure of self-consciousness and indeed all creation, accessible to reason in reflection, is—as for Solov'ëv—the image of God in humanity: 'If God is Trinity, consubstantial and indivisible, then the human spirit, although it is not a trinity, possesses, nevertheless, the form of triunity [. . .] the triune nature of the human spirit is living proof of the Holy Trinity'.⁴⁵ Indeed, the extent of Solov'ëv's influence on this propositional interpretation of the Trinity and Creation is palpable in moments of almost direct quotation, as when Bulgakov describes the subject as 'a question to which the predicate is the answer',⁴⁶ recalling Solov'ëv's description of the predicate as that which 'answers the question, *what* is this subject?'.⁴⁷

Yet *Tragedy* also presents this propositional-cum-Trinitarian schema in a way that goes beyond not only Solov'ëv's presentation of it, but also Bulgakov's own elaboration of the linguistic basis of reality in his *Philosophy of the Name*. For in *Tragedy*, this schema is 'personalised' to a degree that is novel even for Bulgakov. In both Solov'ëv's *Lectures* and Bulgakov's *Philosophy*, the subject of the ontological proposition can be as much a personal as an impersonal entity. This is clear in Solov'ëv when he argues that the 'triunity of God is wholly unfathomable to reason' because of the propositional structure of being. This unfathomability is not unique to God; instead, '*the life of any creature whatever* is unfathomable, for no entity is, as such, exhausted by its formal objective aspect'.⁴⁸ That is to say that every being has an 'inner, subjective aspect' that transcends what can be known in its manifestations, or its predicate, and this means that 'Divinity in heaven *and the least blade of grass on earth* are equally unfathomable, and equally fathomable, for reason'.⁴⁹ The important point here is that the propositional schema—and the ensuing transcendence of being to reason—obtains equally for impersonal entities (a blade of grass) as for created and indeed divine

⁴⁰ 'Glavy o Troichnosti' [Chapters on Trinitarity], in S. N. Bulgakov, *Trudy o troichnosti*, ed. Anna Reznichenko (Moscow: O.G.I., 2001), 70. Bulgakov will repeat this in *The Comforter*, 45: 'In examining the tri-hypostaseity of the Absolute Personality, it must be kept in mind that in itself—in its first positing of itself, so to speak—it does not yet include the hypostatic distinctions, but is defined solely by the triune self-positing of the *I*, as *I-I-I*'. See also *ibid.*, 53-56. Bulgakov's most extended treatment of the necessarily threefold nature of self-consciousness as *I-You-(S)he* is in 'Chapters on Trinitarity'. For an analysis of this text, see Joshua Heath, 'Sergii Bulgakov's Linguistic Trinity', *Modern Theology* (forthcoming).

⁴¹ Cf. the discussion of the primacy of the first-person plural 'we' over the first-person singular 'I' later in this article.

⁴² Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 36f.

⁴⁷ Solov'ëv, *Lectures*, 77.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 92. My emphasis.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 93. My emphasis.

persons. The 'subject' is therefore *not* necessarily a centre of self-consciousness, an *I*; it can be a *who* or a *what*. The same is true of the proposition and the subject as they are presented in Bulgakov's *Philosophy of the Name*. Certainly, Bulgakov maintains there as in *Tragedy* that the first-person singular *I*, the personal pronoun, is the subject *par excellence*: 'The *I* is in a certain sense the root of language [. . .] the *I* is the point of orientation of being, thought and language'.⁵⁰ However, impersonal as well as personal beings are described elsewhere in the same work as equal ontological centres, gestured to in a given proposition. In the phrase 'the king sent an order to the commander', Bulgakov asks 'who is being spoken about here?' 'The king? But also the commander and the order. These ontological centres are brought into mutual relation',⁵¹ with the order as much an 'ontological centre', it would seem, as the king and the commander. The propositional schema obtains for all entities, and both personal and impersonal pronouns 'gesture' toward equally transcendent essences: 'when a person sees a snake and calls it a "snake", they essentially fulfil the function of endowing mute being that is beyond meaning with meaning and saying: *this* is snakelike, is a snake'.⁵² The fundamental form of the proposition is not 'I am A', but 'A is B', with the first-person pronoun being one candidate for *A* alongside impersonal pronouns.

In *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, Bulgakov thoroughly works through the implications of the statement that 'the *I* is the point of orientation of being, thought and language'. Whereas in *Philosophy*, propositions of the kind 'I am A' were ultimately instances of the more general form 'A is B', their priority is reversed in *Tragedy*: 'there arises the question whether all judgements of the type *A is B*, in all its modalities, can fairly be reduced to the type *I am A*. [. . .] The epistemologically (and anthropologically) prior and typical form is, without doubt, *I am A*'.⁵³ Following this general statement of priority, Bulgakov analyses what is going on in a judgement of the 'A is B' kind ('this table is black') in a way that bears little resemblance to the quasi-Platonic analysis of such judgements in *Philosophy*. The 'independent subjects' of such propositions (i.e., 'this table') do indeed bestow 'a likeness of hypostaticity' upon the proposition. However, this likeness is in turn bestowed by the *subject of the utterance*: it is 'incessantly created by our *I* in innumerable, mirroring repetitions'.⁵⁴ In *Philosophy*, such a judgement would be held to conceal a more fundamental judgement of the form '*this* is a table', whose proper subject would be the mysterious 'ontological centre' gestured to by the demonstrative pronoun. Now it is read as abbreviating a judgement whose proper subject is the *I*: 'I see, think, sense that *this table is black*'.⁵⁵ Thus, although we ascribe predicates to an impersonal 'subject', such as a table, *anthropomorphically*, 'in the image and likeness' of the *I* in its relation to its predicate or self-revelation, this is not the same as saying that such 'subjects' are indeed centres of self-revelation, as in *Philosophy*. Rather, it is a statement of the fact that we are fundamentally oriented toward relations of the subject-subject, rather than subject-object, variety. Sadly, this point is somewhat obscured by the inaccuracy of the recent translation.⁵⁶ There, Bulgakov is translated as follows:

I see, I think, I sense this black table. This judgement succinctly expresses the being of the table in itself and, *like the I*, for itself: this table is black.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ *Filosofiiā Imeni* [*Philosophy of the Name*], in Sergii Bulgakov, *Pervoobraz i Obraz*, ed. I. B. Rodnianskaya (Moscow and Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo/Inapress, 1999), vol. 2, 49.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵³ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Translation modified.

⁵⁶ I will discuss in greater detail some of the problems of this translation in the next section.

⁵⁷ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 16.

One may be led to think, on the basis of the translation, that the table does possess a form of being akin to that of personal subjects, i.e., as a centre of self-revelation. However, Bulgakov's point is not that the *being* of the table is succinctly expressed in the judgement. Rather, his point is that the full *judgement* ('I perceive that the table is black') is what is abbreviated by speaking about the table *as if* it were a self-standing, independent subject. The translation ought to read:

I see, think, perceive *that* this table is black. This judgement is expressed in abbreviated form in the assertion of the being of the table in and for itself, *in the likeness of the I*: this table is black.⁵⁸

What all of this means is that a judgement like 'this table is black' is primarily an act of revelation on the part of the judging subject: 'every judgement of objective content can be considered as a predicate of the *I*, as its self-definition'.⁵⁹ Bulgakov maintained in *The Philosophy of the Name* that each name represents the self-disclosure or self-naming of impersonal entities 'out there': 'the name, the phenomenon is the revelation of the thing, the noumenon [. . .] the thing goes out of itself and becomes a cosmic thing'.⁶⁰ In *Tragedy* whilst the notion that the world reveals itself in language is very much present, the focus is much more on the revelation of the *speaking* subject in the names they give and the judgements they make about the world around them: 'the source of thought, in any case, is not here in these object-subjects, but in the underlying formula: *I am something*'.⁶¹

By making objective propositions into moments in a single, continuously developing proposition (the life of a personal subject, 'I am A') Bulgakov takes a decisive step in the generalisation of the Trinitarian, propositional schema. For what he achieves is to *unify* self and world within a single proposition or movement of self-disclosure. Although in *Philosophy*, Bulgakov was at pains to stress the unity of self and world, as the latter names itself through the former, this unity is nonetheless elusive. The world constitutes a totality of self-disclosures or unfolding propositions, each with its own mysterious subject. Although each of these self-disclosures requires the involvement of human speakers, they nonetheless seem to stand *alongside* the speaker's own self-disclosure or life. Indeed, there is a sense in which the epistemological model proposed in *Philosophy* remains that of an observer. For the Trinitarian shape of creation unfolds *before* us in the propositional life of impersonal creatures, in which the pronoun is 'the first hypostasis of being, in which is generated the second hypostasis, the word, and which, perceiving its bond with this verbal expression [. . .] accomplishes its third hypostasis. It stands to reason that this *eternal generation of the world*, the imprint of trihypostaseity that lies upon the whole of creation, also defines the nature of speech'.⁶² The extent to which the unity of self and world is *asserted* in *The Philosophy of the Name* without being satisfactorily grounded is betrayed by this ambiguity concerning the relationship between the process by which the world names itself and speakers name themselves, between the life of the world and the life of humanity.

In *Tragedy*, the Trinitarian and propositional structure of creation is not something that can be observed independently of the subject. Rather, it becomes accessible only through self-reflection and so with the acknowledgement that the subject occupies a place within that structure; that the life of the world and the life of the personal subject together form *one* triune life. Here my earlier assertion—that Bulgakov's project involves an interweaving of epistemology and morality, and that it entails a re-interpretation of *ascesis* as being *within* the world—becomes clearer. For

⁵⁸ This translation is my own, from Sergii Bulgakov, *Tragediia Filosofii*, in idem, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1, ed. S. S. Khoruzhii (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 324.

⁵⁹ *Tragedy*, 16. Translation modified.

⁶⁰ Bulgakov, *Philosophy of the Name*, 61.

⁶¹ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 16. Translation modified.

⁶² Bulgakov, *Philosophy of the Name*, 50.

intellectual effort, which entails interpreting objective judgements like ‘the table is black’, as in fact predicates of a more fundamental judgement of the form ‘I am A’, is inseparable from the moral, ascetic effort of renouncing the God’s-eye-view that characterises philosophy. With this effort, the true object of knowledge comes into view. In *The Philosophy of the Name*, the argument was that, *contra* Kant, we can know essences or noumena, because the proposition attests to the continuity between a thing and its manifestations. But the object of knowledge remains such things-in-themselves *out there*. In *Tragedy*, the ‘thing-in-itself’ is what is redefined: ‘the *I*, the hypostasis, is truly the thing in itself, the noumenon’,⁶³ the transcendent object of knowledge that is made accessible in its manifestations: ‘the transcendent is always also inseparably linked to the immanent; the transcendent becomes immanent. The subject, the hypostasis, always reveals itself, always expresses itself, in the predicate’.⁶⁴ That which we come to know in scrutinising our judgements about the world is in fact the self, the *I* that makes those judgements.

But what does this mean? How can the judgement ‘the table is black’ be meaningfully understood as disclosive of the self? To answer this, it is worth asking whether we can say any more about the *transcendence* of the personal subject. This transcendence is occasionally presented in *Tragedy* in terms of ‘hidden depths’ and of ‘self-enclosure’; the transcendent subject is a ‘realm hitherto unknown to light’.⁶⁵ All of this suggests an understanding of the subject as transcendent by virtue of an inaccessible, private *quantum* that is externalised in the predicate: ‘the self-enclosed *I* finds itself on an island inaccessible to any kind of thinking or being, but discovers *within itself a certain image of being*’.⁶⁶ The problems with such a presentation of transcendence are not difficult to articulate with respect to Bulgakov’s project in *Tragedy*, not least because it threatens to re-instate the priority of an allegedly private self over relation with the world. But Bulgakov has more to say elsewhere in *Tragedy*, where the transcendental subject is shown to be a plurality, a *we*, rather than a monadic *I*: ‘as soon as we attempt to think or to perceive the *I* as a unity, without any *you* [. . .] the *I* becomes unintelligible’.⁶⁷ Bulgakov argues that this is implicit not only in Kant’s moral philosophy, in the universality of the Categorical Imperative, but also in Kant’s epistemology, which makes universality a criterion for truth. Such universal signification is only possible on the condition of intersubjective unity: ‘judgement, precisely in its nature as universal and universally signifying, is a silent yet expressive gesture towards the *we*, is the site of the *we*’.⁶⁸ Insofar as such a unity is *assumed* by thought and speech in their universal scope, ‘the plurality of the *I* is a fundamental axiom of thought and life’.⁶⁹ The transcendent subject is thus not merely an *I*, but a *we*.

Further, we can say that what is ‘hidden’ in the subject, that which lies ‘beyond’ the predicate, is not a mysterious *quantum*. Rather the subject’s ‘noumenal quality’ is the *act* of the subject’s ‘self-positing’ in relation to other subjects: ‘the nature of the hypostasis in relation to conciliarity [*sobornost*], its position and self-perception within the all-unity [*vseedinstvo*], as a supertemporal act lying at the very boundary of creation’.⁷⁰ So we must read propositions of the form ‘A is B’ as abbreviated forms of a more fundamental self-determination ‘I am A’, which is *in turn* an expression of the *love* (or lack thereof) of the subject for others. An important qualification to make here is that Bulgakov is not concerned with love as an affective state. Rather, he understands love to be the way in which our ‘pre-conscious’ positioning of ourselves in the world

⁶³ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 11 f. Translation modified.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

involves others. It is a mode of knowledge proper to subject-subject relationships and is determinative of the quality of our knowledge about the world:

There is a special way for the subject to know a subject, but not an object: this way out of one's self is *not* through one's own nature, but from self to self, that is, to a *you*. And the only organ of such cognition [. . .] is this exit from the self through which I know myself as another. This is love . . .⁷¹

What is disclosed in one's judgements about the world, in the unity that one makes out of the world, is the unity that the judging subject makes (or does not make) with others. Insofar as one's selfhood is an act of self-assertion, and thus a denial of the true, *collective* constitution of self-consciousness, our stance toward and cognition about the world will likewise be characterised by subjectivity and falsehood. To the extent that our selfhood is an act of love, an affirmation of the truth of personhood, our knowledge of the world will also be true: 'To free oneself from subjectivity—this means to be a conciliar (that is, a true) *I*, to be in the truth and therefore to know it. This means to be a true subject, who does not deface his or her own predicate, but leaves it free to reveal itself'.⁷² The unity of the world as love, as 'all-unity' [*vseedinstvo*] can only be known from within and as the manifestation of interpersonal unity-in-love, in a coincidence of *sobornost'* and integral knowledge [*tsel'noe znanie*].⁷³ This conditioning of knowledge by love is what makes Bulgakov's integration of ontology, morality and epistemology a distinctively Trinitarian project. For if creation is in the image of the Trinity, whose pre-eminent name is Love, then the world as love or 'all-unity' (ontology) can only be known (epistemology) by subjects who are themselves determined in love, rather than by self-assertion (morality).

To this extent, knowledge is not an indifferent registering of states of affairs 'out there'. Rather, it is a creative labour, which has as its goal not only the realisation of the unity of the world with itself and with the subject, but also of subjects with one another as one, interpersonal subject. All creation thus comes to form a single life, a single triune proposition. As such an integral image of the Trinity, the whole creation manifests its unity with the creator also, a unity which is the privileged vision of the saints: 'to the illumined eye of the ascetic the world presents itself as the living riza of the Godhead, as his Word, clothed in the Holy Spirit'.⁷⁴ What *The Tragedy of Philosophy* thus presents—beneath the density of its engagements with the pantheon of German Idealism—is a vision of intellectual endeavour as inseparable from the wider human vocation to realise the life of God in the world. For thought too is the arena for that dispossession to which all Christians are called, and which is enjoined with a promise: 'those who lose their life for my sake will find it'.

II

Anyone undertaking a translation of Sergii Bulgakov's work should be applauded. He is a difficult writer: hermetic in style, prone to paragraph-long sentences and page-long paragraphs, and fond of word play, liturgical citation and poetic allusion. All this besides the straightforward lack of equivalents in English for certain words and phrases in Russian. An important example of the

⁷¹ Ibid., 114.

⁷² Ibid., 115.

⁷³ There are clear affinities at this point with another of Bulgakov's major influences, namely the work of Pavel Florenskii, whose *Pillar and Ground of the Truth* has as its epigraph 'Knowledge becomes love' (Gregory of Nyssa). Crucially, what Bulgakov is proposing is the reverse: *love becomes knowledge*.

⁷⁴ Bulgakov, *Hypostasis and Hypostaseity*, 38.

latter in *Tragedy* is Bulgakov's frequent use of two alternatives for what in English is covered simply by 'subject': there is the loanword 'sub'ekt' that tends to refer to the 'subject' understood in a broad, philosophical sense; and there is 'podlezhashchee', a calque ('pod-' meaning 'under' and 'lezhashchee' meaning 'lying') that is usually restricted to the grammatical subject. These are translated as 'philosophical subject' and 'grammatical subject' respectively, a choice that is understandable and indeed necessary, although it also necessarily rarefies a distinction that Bulgakov is actually blurring throughout the work. Such are the difficulties with which any translation from Russian into English must contend, and Churchyard's translation ought to be commended for where it is lucid and faithful to the original. However, its readability conceals the fact that the translation suffers in several respects: there is a tendency toward over-clarification and supplementation; mis-translations of admittedly complex sentences are not infrequent and are occasionally major; mis-translations of individual words are also not infrequent, and it is unclear whether these are due to misunderstanding or a missing round of proof-reading.⁷⁵ All of these further attest to a misunderstanding of crucial elements of Bulgakov's text, which are necessarily passed on to the reader and which are evident in ways other than straightforward problems of translation.

The decision to translate the second-person singular Russian pronoun 'ty' with the archaic and formal English 'thou' is the most obvious instance of unnecessary distortion, despite the plausible objection that English has only 'you' for both the second-person singular and the second-person plural. The formal second-person pronoun is a foreign import into Russian: the custom of using the second-person plural 'vy' in addressing one's superiors and those with whom one is unfamiliar is a relatively late phenomenon that has its immediate predecessor in the corresponding tendency in French, and was introduced by Peter the Great together with the Table of Ranks.⁷⁶ It is absent from the Russian Orthodox liturgy, where God, angels and saints are all addressed in the same second-person singular 'ty' as is used for one's family, friends etc. To the Russianist, the use of 'thou' thus jars,⁷⁷ especially as one of Bulgakov's most rapturous passages at the end of *Tragedy* concerns God's entry into human affairs as an *interlocutor*, who is 'you' and who says 'you' to human beings. Indeed, what Walter Kaufmann writes apropos of Buber's *Ich und Du* [*I and You*] is relevant here: 'Thou immediately brings to mind God; *Du* [*You*] does not. And the God of whom it makes us think is not the God to whom one might cry out in gratitude, despair, or agony, not the God to whom one complains and prays spontaneously: it is the God of the pulpits, the God of the holy tone'.⁷⁸ The miracle of intimacy that so delights Bulgakov is obscured when God is 'thou' and made simply bizarre when God in turn addresses human beings as 'thou': 'The fact that God says *thou* to human beings [. . .] and the fact that he gives to the

⁷⁵ Two minor examples of this, the first grammatical and the other lexical. Churchyard has Bulgakov advocating 'a singular empiricism, freed from the narrow and vulgar idea of empiricism, and capturing living and mystical experience in all its depth' (6). But 'capturing' is in fact a present *passive* participle in the Russian original, not active, such that the translation ought to read: 'A singular empiricism, freed from the narrow and vulgar idea of empiricism, and instead *taken* [i.e., understood] according to all the depth of living and mystical experience'.

For the second example, which is found on the same page, Churchyard's Bulgakov asserts that 'the world, actuality, is not a *single*, purely rational being' (6). But what Churchyard has translated as 'single', одно только, in fact means 'merely' or 'simply', and thus the translation ought to read: 'the world, actuality, is not *merely* rational being' or 'is not rational being *alone*'. These may seem like minor examples, although the distortion of meaning is significant. But more importantly, these errors on the level of individual words are met with more substantial errors on the level of whole sentences or sentence-sequences.

⁷⁶ I thank Natasha Franklin for her memorable first-year undergraduate lectures on Russian grammar, so memorable that the discussion of the second-person pronouns remains clear in my mind.

⁷⁷ It is therefore regrettable that the same use of 'thou' is found in Boris Jakim's translations of Bulgakov, as in *The Comforter*: 'all of these three hypostatic centres of the one I are equivalent or equi-hypostatic as *I-thou-he*' (45).

⁷⁸ 'I and You: A Prologue', in Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970), 14.

human being, to created being, the power to approach God as *Thou*, that is, He accepts a creature into the Divine *We*, this is a miracle of God's charity'.⁷⁹ This Divine *We* becomes a peculiarly English one, in which even Father and Son presumably address one another with a respectable *Thou*. And Bulgakov too addresses his readers as 'thou', making an otherwise unremarkable passage in the original into a moment of inappropriately theatrical apostrophe: 'by virtue of that love with which thou lovest, thou naturally affirmest [!] thy own I . . .'.⁸⁰ In the same prologue to *Ich und Du*, Kaufmann is clear that the translation of *Du* as 'thou' distorts Buber's intention: 'suppose a man wrote a book about direct relationships and tried to get away from the formulas of theologians and philosophers: a theologian would translate it and turn *Ich und Du* into *I and Thou*'.⁸¹ The irony of the present case is that the translator has turned out to be more a 'theologian' than Bulgakov, who clearly has little interest in the 'God of the holy tone'.

The fact that the consistent choice of 'thou' rather than 'you' is indeed a choice makes it all the more perplexing that it is not addressed and justified in the translator's introduction. Indeed, it is puzzling that the translator felt it necessary to 'pass over the only partly soluble difficulties presented by such terms as *sobornij*, *sushchij* and *obraz*'.⁸² Where else, barring a translator's introduction, should such difficulties be addressed, especially as we already have a lucid and comprehensive theological foreword from John Milbank? While it is often frustrating when a reviewer criticises a text for what it *does not* say, part of the translator's task is to guide the reader into the resonances of words in the original that are inevitably lacking in the translated equivalents. Such is the situation with a word (and concept) like *sobornost'*, which, as we have seen, was central to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian intellectual tradition. This history, which embraces the work of Khomiakov, Dostoevskii and Solov'ëv, to name a few, is at play in Bulgakov's use and development of the concept of *sobornost'* in *Tragedy* and informs the ambition of the whole work. To simply translate it with the unwieldy 'conciliarity' and without any discussion of this context means that readers will be unaware of how Bulgakov, in developing at such length the concept of *sobornost'*, is situating his work and making a decisive contribution within the tradition of Russian religious thought. And this situation is surely crucial if we are to understand what Bulgakov is trying to do.

Turning to more straightforward instances of misunderstanding, let us take, first, this passage from the translation:

The life of the human spirit is a continuously self-developing and self-accomplishing judgement: I am something, a certain A. More precisely, it is necessary to express the sequence of judgements thus: *I* am something, **I** – *am* – *A*.⁸³

On the basis of the translation, one would be inclined to think that the 'sequence' under discussion is the sequence from one kind of judgement, 'I am something', to another kind, 'I – am – A'. For Bulgakov is—it seems—speaking about the order of 'judgements' plural, whilst the translator's decision to retain the fourfold typographic variation of the first-person pronoun *I* in the original (in italics, upper- and lower-case, and in roman, upper- and lower-case), by introducing a bold-type *I*, furthers this sense that we are dealing with two distinct *kinds* of proposition here. Perhaps this sequence is a movement from the indeterminate 'something' of the first judgement to the determinate

⁷⁹ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 154.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁸¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 15.

⁸² Stephen Churchyard, 'On the Idea of a Christian Materialism', in *Tragedy*, lvii f.

⁸³ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 93.

‘A’ of the second. It is unclear. But compare Churchyard’s translation with the translation below of the same passage:

The life of the human spirit is a continuously self-developing and self-accomplishing judgement: I am something, a certain A. It is necessary to express the *order* of the *judgement* more precisely, in the following way: *I something am, I A am*.⁸⁴

Reading the above, it is clear that the ‘order’ or ‘sequence’ in which Bulgakov is interested is not between forms of judgement, but rather between the constituent parts of any given judgement. The point Bulgakov is making is that the predicate, which usually comes third and last in a proposition, ought to come *second*, changing places with the copula, a change which is absent from the published translation. Why is this important? Because of Bulgakov’s Trinitarian interpretation of a proposition’s structure, according to which the subject stands as the *first* hypostasis, the Father, while the predicate stands as the *second* hypostasis, the Son or Word, and the copula stands as the *third* hypostasis, the Spirit. The translation misses this entirely, introducing instead a distinction between kinds of judgement that does not exist in the original. How? First, by mis-translating a genitive singular [of the/a judgement] as a plural [of judgements]; second, by reproducing the aforementioned typographical variation in the first-person singular pronoun, even though the editor of the Russian edition rightly asserts that ‘the choice between the four possible ways of writing *I*, one of the central concepts of the book, is entirely variable and only in some cases subject to a discernible logic’.⁸⁵ While it is understandable that the translation reproduces the latter, typographic ambiguity, the transformation of this ambiguity into misunderstanding is not. The translator’s assurance that ‘readers need not become over-anxious about the distinctions involved [in the various forms of *I*], since, happily, these are usually clear from the context’,⁸⁶ turns out to be ironic.

There are two more significant instances of mistranslation on which I would like to dwell, owing to their bearing on what has already been said about the transcendence of the subject, on the one hand, and about love as a mode of knowing, on the other. It will become clear that the translation unfortunately has Bulgakov saying the exact opposite of what he wishes to say on these points. Turning to the first, there is the following important discussion of the peculiar transcendence of the personal subject, the hypostasis or the *I*, rendered in the translation as follows:

This hypostasis is beyond the bounds of thought, and, as fully transcendent to thought, is a zero for it; whatever is perfectly and completely transcendent to thought, that is, simply does not exist for thought. Yet such a transcendence is nothing other than a mathematical limit, which it is never possible for thought to make real, and the *Ding an sich*, the thing in itself is still τὸ νοούμενον, the intelligible.⁸⁷

So the transcendence of subject to predicate is identified with the transcendence of a mathematical limit; the hypostasis is made a zero for thought. But such a reading of Bulgakov forces him to contradict himself both between texts and, more jarringly, within *Tragedy* itself and even within the passage just quoted. For how can Bulgakov assert that the transcendence of the subject is that of ‘a mathematical limit, which it is never possible for thought to make real’, yet then insist on the

⁸⁴ *Tragediia*, 391. Translation my own.

⁸⁵ *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1, 571.

⁸⁶ ‘On the Idea of a Christian Materialism’, lviii.

⁸⁷ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 13.

'intelligibility' or 'thinkability' of the *I*? The contradiction is explicit when this passage is compared to another in the following chapter, where Bulgakov writes that 'the noumenon [that is, the *I*] does not possess being in the world of phenomena, yet, at the same time, *it is not a zero*, for existence, if not being, belongs to it [. . .] Thus the *Ding an sich* turns out to be not merely a limit concept'.⁸⁸ Whilst it is true to say that Bulgakov insists throughout this work on the inherent contradictions of created subjectivity, it simply cannot be the case that Bulgakov simultaneously maintains in *Tragedy* that the subject is and is not 'a zero', that it does and does not possess existence.

The problem is that the translation turns a *contrast* between the transcendence-in-immanence of the personal subject and the unthinkable, fictitious transcendence of the mathematical limit or zero, into an *identification*. What are two contrasting conceptions of transcendence in the original become one in the translation. Indeed, this is precisely the contrast we find at the beginning to the Epilogue of *The Comforter*. There, Bulgakov asks whether the Father, the 'subject' within the Trinity, is not 'a pure zero, incapable of being grasped . . .?'.⁸⁹ Note the textual echoes between this passage and the one under discussion. But Bulgakov's point is that such an account of transcendence *cannot* apply to the Father, i.e., to the very hypostasis to which Churchyard attributes the transcendence of a *zero*. Returning to the original passage in the light of the above, a more precise translation would read as follows:

Only that which is fully and altogether transcendent is beyond thought, and as fully transcendent to it, is a *zero* for thought, i.e., it does not exist at all. But such a transcendence is nothing more than a mathematical limit, never to be realised in thought, while the *Ding an sich*, the thing in itself, is nonetheless *to noumenon*, the intelligible.⁹⁰

Articulating a distinctive sense of the transcendence of the personal subject to their manifestations is an abiding pre-occupation of Bulgakov's personalist philosophy and Trinitarian theology, being bound up with his efforts to articulate the place of the Divine Wisdom within the Trinity, on the one hand, and also his efforts to develop an account of the monarchy of the Father that does not lapse into subordinationism, on the other. The account of transcendence which we find in *Tragedy* is a decisive moment in that project of articulation. For it to be mistranslated in this way means that readers risk misunderstanding Bulgakov on one of the most important points in his thought.

This brings us to the final passage to be considered. The foregoing discussion has set out Bulgakov's understanding of the subject's *involvement* in what they know. Acts of thinking are, like all other personal activities, acts of self-expression. They express the 'noumenal' quality of the subject. This 'noumenal' aspect has been further clarified as the quality of the subject's self-positing with respect to other subjects. Our thinking and knowing, as acts of self-manifestation, are conditioned by the degree to which our selfhood is an act of self-assertion, in which the subject affirms themselves against other subjects, or an act of love: 'insofar as truthfulness is defined from the side of the subject, its attainment is linked precisely to the condition of the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 37. Translation modified.

⁸⁹ Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 359.

⁹⁰ *Tragediia*, 321. Translation my own. The problem here is a grammatical misunderstanding. This sentence is structured in the original by an extended 'that . . . which', or 'то . . . что', construction, with the two correlating elements separated by several clauses. Rather than correlating the two, Churchyard has instead translated the 'that' or 'to' as referring to the 'hypostasis' of the previous sentence. But this is not grammatically justifiable, for 'hypostasis' is feminine in Russian, whereas 'to' is a neuter form.

hypostasis, whether it is closed off in egotistical mono-hypostaseity, or instead expanding within a collective, hypostatic plural unity that is inspired by love for the truth'.⁹¹

It simply cannot make sense, therefore, to oppose love and epistemology. But this is what the translation does:

We said that the comprehension of conciliarity [*sobornost'*] in the *I* was accomplished through love and in love, and the epistemology of the subject is comprised of its opposite, self-love, which has many manifestations.⁹²

Punctuation and syntax do make the original unclear. But the plain fact that Bulgakov insists *on the following page* that a 'denial of love' 'devalues and weakens knowledge' should be enough to rule out the juxtaposition of love and epistemology that Churchyard introduces. A careful parsing out of the passage yields the following translation, which is both in keeping with the grammar of the text and the meaning of the work:

We said that the understanding of conciliarity [*sobornost'*] in the *I* is accomplished through love: the epistemology of the subject consists in love and its opposite, self-love – which has many different manifestations, from coldness to hostility and hatred.⁹³

Do these and other such moments of misunderstanding result in an irredeemable distortion of Bulgakov's original text? The answer is no. Lucidity and fidelity to the original are not hard to find, although as the foregoing discussion indicates, they are not as pervasive as they may appear. One can, for example, see quite clearly from the text that surrounds the above example, as well as from other passages in the work, that Bulgakov unambiguously makes knowing a function of loving, rather than opposing love and epistemology. Likewise, I have already shown how Bulgakov makes clear elsewhere in *Tragedy* that the transcendence of the hypostasis or subject is *not* that of a zero or 'limit concept', in a way that negates the attribution of such a transcendence to the subject by Churchyard in the passage discussed. But it is not good enough that significant errors of translation can be contained and corrected in this way. For in the case of the latter two examples, contradictions are introduced into Bulgakov's (already difficult) text that are not present in the original and that concern some of the work's central claims. Moreover, in the case of the first example discussed, which concerns the proper order of the constituent elements of a proposition, such a central claim is simply missed, as the translation creates a distinction between *kinds* of proposition that does not exist in the original. All of these instances, together with the decision to impose a formal 'thou' onto the text without any warrant in the Russian, suggest a lack of attention at best and a lack of understanding at worst on the part of the translator. Indeed, besides the more egregious instances of error, one gets the impression at

⁹¹ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 116. Translation modified. Indeed, the translation of this sentence is also unnecessarily problematic, with a number of relationships that are grammatically unambiguous in the original becoming ambiguous in translation. In Churchyard's version, the 'hypostasis' is 'impelled by love towards the truth as a hypostatic plural unity', with it being unclear whether truth is this 'hypostatic plural unity'. But the original makes clear both that 'impelled' is not the complement of 'hypostasis' and that 'truth' is not correlated with 'hypostatic plural unity'. Both 'plural unity' and 'impelled [by love]' are in the prepositional case, whereas 'hypostasis' is not, meaning that the 'plural unity' [i.e., humanity or the Church] is 'impelled [by love]', not the isolated 'hypostasis'. Meanwhile 'truth' is in the dative because it is the complement of 'love for the truth', whilst 'plural unity' is in the prepositional because it is the complement of 'expanding within a collective, hypostatic plural unity', meaning that 'truth' cannot be identified 'as a hypostatic plural unity'. This apparent insensitivity to questions of case is concerning.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Tragediia*, 412. Translation my own.

various points in the text of a translation done in haste. How else could an unnecessarily clunky phrase like 'the underlying rock needed to be significantly exposed to the action of the weather',⁹⁴ rather than 'the underlying rock needed to be significantly weathered', have made it into the final text? In sum, the presence of numerous errors in the translation (and I include the use of 'thou' as an error, rather than a stylistic choice), in addition to clearly avoidable flaws in style, mean that I cannot concur with those who have endorsed the translation as 'magnificent' or 'careful'. This is a shame, because such a translation is what *The Tragedy of Philosophy* deserves.

III

In his articulation of the task of theology, Bulgakov occasionally employs the metaphor of translation.⁹⁵ There is an 'inevitable influence of contemporary philosophical thought, which the dogmatic theologian cannot avoid, a kind of *translation* into contemporary language of the lexicon that was proper to the early church'.⁹⁶ Theology is translation because forms of thought and expression are not impervious to the passage of time. But theology is translation, and not arbitrary fabrication, because its object abides and underwrites time, such that although the forms of approach must necessarily be re-made, the end of that approach remains the same, guaranteeing a unity of reference across varying theological modes. Theology is translation, then, because it is concerned with '*expressing religious thought about eternity in time*, about the supra-temporal within the con-temporary'.⁹⁷

The translation from ancient to contemporary forms is underwritten by a more profound exercise in translation from the eternal into the temporal, and the initiative for such a translation does not rest with the latter. Rather, God performs such a translation of His own life in the act of creation: 'that which in God is eternal is revealed for creation only in time, and here one truly needs a *translation* from one language to another'.⁹⁸ And the Incarnation is such a translation in time of the Father's eternal naming of Himself in the Son, such that the Name of Jesus names also the Trinity. For the world to be the revelation of God is for it to be a translation of the Father's naming of Himself in the Son, of God's naming of Himself as Trinity, of God's naming of Himself as Wisdom, and this is precisely what is conveyed by Bulgakov's making the proposition 'I am A' the fundamental form of created life.

Theology deals with the translation already performed by God. The antinomies of self-consciousness and of dogma, the 'cryptograms' of the Scriptures, are all such utterances of the eternal in time that the theologian must decipher. But other such utterances are the lives of the saints, as translations of the life of Christ and of the Trinity. Such lives, like that of Saint Sergii of Radonezh, may be remarkable for their silence, yet 'silence is the speech of the world to come, and now it is the word of those who already in this world have stepped into the one to come'.⁹⁹ For the theologian, the task is 'to dress that silent, secret word in words, to translate it into our human language, to nourish our theology from the source of the knowledge of God'.¹⁰⁰ Though

⁹⁴ Bulgakov, *Tragedy*, 26.

⁹⁵ Even in *Tragedy*, we find an adjacent description of philosophy as a '*transcription* [. . .] of the motifs of triunity' (23).

⁹⁶ Sergii Bulgakov, 'Dogmat i dogmatika', in *Zhivoe Predanie: Pravoslavie v Sovremennosti* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1936), 23.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁸ Sergii Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 123.

⁹⁹ Sergii Bulgakov, 'Blagodatnye zavety prep. Sergiia ruskomu bogoslovstvovaniiu', *Put'* 5 (1926): 3-19 (3).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Bulgakov was—like so many Russians of his generation—given to prolixity, one nonetheless finds in his texts a language whose quality is at times not unlike the ‘silent word’ of the saints. To read and to translate him, then, is at best to share in the searing, unmaking vision of the things of God that was undoubtedly his.